

# MR. SMITH

By LEE FOSTER HARTMAN

From *Liberty*, under title *Two Minutes to Live*

IT WAS the second night out from New York, and the *Tortola* was tossing in a heavy sea—which is to be expected when one is in the latitude of Diamond Shoals, steaming southward in a small West Indian liner. The smokeroom was deserted except for the steward, a big Barbadian Negro, who was polishing glasses in the bar and crooning softly to himself. He had brought me a whisky and soda, which stood in a tall glass at my elbow while I wrote. As the vessel rose and fell the ice in the glass lurched gently.

Presently the windward door was tugged open, a blast of air charged in, and the door slammed shut behind a passenger who looked about uncertainly, braced himself, and started forward. He caught at my table to steady himself as another roll tilted everything to starboard. The woodwork creaked and eased itself, and there came the rattle of the steering gear. He hadn't noticed my glass, which his elbow struck and sent crashing to the floor. He was distressed by the mishap and profusely apologetic.

"You must let me order you another," he insisted.

"Won't you have one yourself?" I invited.

He seemed to hesitate as he caught the aroma of the spilled Scotch, and then reluctantly yielded. "It's Scotch, isn't it?" he appealed to me before giving the order to the steward, who had come forward to clear away the glass fragments. "I'm not much of a whisky drinker," he confessed, as if the prospective drink was not exactly to his liking. "And yet on one occasion, several years ago, I had to drink a very great deal of it." He seemed unhappy over the recollection. "Force of circumstances, I might say, necessitated it," he explained. "The situation was peculiar."

He seemed an odd type, with every wish to be friendly but

inhibited by a natural timidity and a punctiliousness of manner which was almost formal. A small-town college professor was my first guess. He was a drab little man, quite inconspicuous except for a luxuriant grayish-brown beard. His eyes were a palish blue and almost childlike with their round, solemn glance. He looked as if the fifty-odd years of his life had been spent in studious pursuits quite remote from all rude and bracing contacts with the world. But, as I presently learned, he had adventured about the world a good deal in his own queer fashion. He was a bird collector for the Smithsonian Institute and now on his way to British Guiana.

"My name is Smith," he informed me, and added, with an effort to be jocose, "I dare say you've heard it before."

Just then the steward set a tray before us, and Mr. Smith's glance, directed toward the glasses, became apprehensive. He lifted his drink, tasted it without enthusiasm, and then set it down.

"I've never developed any liking for this sort of thing," he confided, still apologetic. "Not that I have any compunctions about it or that it disagrees with me. Once, as I said, I must have drunk half a bottle of Scotch whisky at a short sitting. But I don't recall experiencing any particular effect from it."

When I ventured to smile he leaned forward very earnestly. "No, I'm quite serious. If I may judge from that single experience I doubt if liquor in quantity would upset me."

"Will you smoke?"

He brightened visibly at the sight of the cigars I drew from my pocket. "Now you're tempting me. My one vice." As he lighted a match, his eye fell to my sheets of manuscript. "I'm afraid I'm interrupting you at your writing."

"It's nothing much. Just a story. I can get on with it tomorrow."

"You write—stories?" he asked. He seemed to evince an almost childish interest in the fact. "I've often wondered how you manage to think up stories—you people who make a business of writing."

"Well," I began lamely, "one gets hold of an idea or an odd situation and tries to make something out of it."

He nodded as if he understood, but I was confident that he didn't. I sensed in him that type of mind to which all things

literary remain an eternal baffling mystery. But the sight of literature in the making—even literature of a sort—intrigued him. As he puffed his cigar to a glow his gaze lingered curiously upon my manuscript.

"I've often thought some writer could make a good story out of my name—Smith. There are so many Smiths. You might have two different men named Smith, and then have one mistaken for the other."

In his naïve way he meant this to be helpful, and I could do no less than thank him for the banal suggestion. "Yes, there might be something in that," I agreed, but without enthusiasm.

For some moments we smoked in silence. The ship continued to roll, and the ice lurched softly in our glasses. He looked up at me once or twice as if about to say something but was too diffident.

"You know," he finally broke out, "that idea of the two Smiths occurred to me years ago when I was in one of these West Indian islands which we are headed toward now. That was the time, by the way, when I had to drink all that whisky."

"Did you fall in with another Smith?" I asked, for the whisky episode began to pique my interest. I couldn't imagine him a participant in any gay and riotous festivity. He wasn't the type to be drawn into a convivial party.

"No, indeed," he answered with decision. "The man I fell in with was named Donaldson. In the island of Santa Clara. It's still untouched by tourists. No towns, no roads to speak of. It's mostly mountainous—volcanic formation. With deep ravines—great clefts that seem to reach right up to the sky, filled with the most gorgeous tropical vegetation you ever saw. Stupendous hanging gardens. Ferns growing as large as trees. And, naturally, a paradise for birds.

"It was the birds that had come to interest this man Donaldson. Why he stayed marooned in that lonely place I could never understand. He lived by himself, in a shack over on the farther coast. Time must have hung heavy on his hands. Perhaps that's why he began to notice the birds and study their habits."

Mr. Smith paused and looked at me uncertainly. "Shall I go on and tell you about him?"

"By all means," I urged.

"Well, to start at the beginning. One day there came to the Smithsonian a letter of inquiry. It was from this man Donaldson, and he wanted to know this and that about certain birds he had been observing. The letter was a little shaky as to spelling, but the questions were pertinent. It looked as if the fellow had got hold of at least two species we didn't know anything about. So I answered the letter, told him what he wanted to know, and after a while he wrote again. A sort of correspondence developed between us. He joked me about my name being Smith; asked if I resembled any of the other Smiths. So I enclosed a snapshot of myself and said I'd be pleased to have a picture of him.

"After a long while he replied. He said in his queer, jocular way that the only photograph of himself was kept where he couldn't lay hands on it or he would have destroyed it long ago, but if I would shave off my beard I might easily pass for him in the dark. Then he asked if by any chance I was a Smith from Ripton Valley in Vermont, which amazed me completely, for my family happened to come from that district. I could only figure it out that he had lived there once himself, and having known a lot of the Smiths in Ripton Valley he had spotted a family likeness in that picture of me. He was a sharp one. His observations of birds had proved that.

"Well, naturally, I grew interested in the fellow, and I decided to look him up if my duties ever took me down to that part of the Caribbean. And a couple of years later the chance came. The only port in Santa Clara was a straggling Negro village, set among the usual coconut palms, in a little bay on the west coast. But there was a resident commissioner, to whom I presented my credentials, and he offered very kindly to put me up. There was really no other place to stay. Then I asked about Donaldson."

"'Oh, that chap!' said the commissioner. He was a very correct British official, and his eyebrows went up at my question. 'I believe he keeps pretty much to himself on the other side of the island. You know him?' And then I explained about our ornithological correspondence. 'Fancy!' was his sole comment. I began to think he had no great opinion of Donaldson but was politely keeping it to himself. 'I'll give you a note to the keeper of the lighthouse at Cap

Indienne. He'll show you where Donaldson lives near by. And have him show you through the Cap Indienne light. It's the most powerful light for navigation in these waters south of Saint Lucia.'"

Mr. Smith broke off to relight his cigar, and in the pause I remarked that I had seen mention of the Cap Indienne light in a guidebook I had been reading. He nodded, and his eyes fell to his glass. He took another sip, much as if it were something unpleasant prescribed by the doctor.

"Does this interest you?" he asked almost timidly.

"Very much indeed," I assured him. I was wondering where the whisky episode would come in.

"It isn't a story exactly—not what a writer like you would consider a story. But maybe you could get something out of it." He made another effort to swallow some of the liquid in his glass. "Well, a week or so later I worked over to the other side of the island and met Donaldson. I had written him from Washington about my trip, but he didn't know just when I would turn up. So I gave him quite a start. He wasn't used to visitors, and I was a complete stranger to him. Even my hunting coat and collector's gun didn't identify me for a moment. He had come to the door of his shack for some purpose, not hearing my footsteps, and there we were suddenly face to face.

"He fairly jumped at the sight of me, as if I had given him the fright of his life. Suddenly he remembered. 'You're Smith!' he exclaimed. We shook hands. 'Come inside,' he said, visibly relieved. He eyed the bulging pockets of my hunting coat. 'What have you got there?' he demanded, almost suspiciously. At the sight of my day's kill the uneasy lines in his face softened. He began to talk about birds.

"I stayed with him for a couple of weeks. He wouldn't hear of my going back to the other side of the island. And his bungalow was fairly comfortable if it was a makeshift construction on the edge of a tropic wilderness. He had lived there for several years in a queer, unbroken solitude."

Mr. Smith paused and shook his head thoughtfully. The ship continued to pitch and roll. Fierce blasts of wind buffeted the windows of the smokeroom. At intervals came the lash of flying spray.



"Even after two weeks of him he was still almost a stranger to me. My wife says I haven't the knack of getting acquainted with people. And there was something about Donaldson—I don't know. I guess we weren't exactly the same sort. But he knew every inch of that wilderness and helped me a lot in getting the particular birds I was after. He seldom spoke about himself. He was what you'd call tight-lipped. But I learned that he was a Canadian, grew up on a wheat farm in Alberta. Wilcox, the keeper of the lighthouse, who was Donaldson's only neighbour, didn't believe it. 'Anyone can see that he's an American, like yourself.'—'But,' I argued, 'how can he be? His parents came over from Liverpool.' The lighthouse keeper only looked at me curiously. 'Come, now, aren't you a relative of his?' Which of course was absurd."

"The name Donaldson sounds Scotch," I interrupted. "What was he like?"

The question seemed to stump Mr. Smith's powers of description. He struggled for a moment and then shook his head helplessly. "My wife says I never observe anything but birds. No notion at all about people's looks or clothes. I don't know. Donaldson was just an ordinary person. Rather short. About my size. You could see he wasn't educated in the accepted sense. But he had a shifty, quick mind. He was what you'd call smart—a man you wouldn't exactly want to trust. What his business had been——" Mr. Smith let it go with a despairing shrug. "Living so long in that tropic wilderness had obliterated all telltale signs."

"What I did come to notice about him was a sort of uneasiness, as if he were always on guard against something. He seemed afraid of people, didn't want them to come near him. The result probably of living so long by himself. Once a month he went over to the other side of the island for his supplies. He said he was always glad to get back."

"Having me on his hands for a couple of weeks necessitated an extra trip. It happened to be a day when a vessel was in port and a handful of tourists on shore. He had said he would not be back until after dark, but he must have made surprisingly good time, for when I returned to the cabin after a day's collecting by myself he had already been there and departed again. He had dumped down the supplies and

scribbled me a note to say that some unexpected business had called him away. He might be gone several days. I was to make myself at home in the meantime.

"Toward sunset on the following day I was dressing some birds and working fast while the daylight lasted. But the sun dropped before I realized it, and the tropic darkness was around me like a shot. I lit a lamp—there was the merest drop of oil left in it—but instead of refilling it at once I sat down again to my work. I grew completely absorbed in it until suddenly I became aware of a strange man at the open doorway, looking in upon me.

"It gave me a queer start, for I had the feeling that he had been standing there watching me for some time. I couldn't make him out clearly, but I could feel—yes, actually feel—his eyes boring into me.

"'You want Mr. Donaldson?' I asked. For a moment he didn't answer but just continued to eye me. 'Donaldson,' he repeated the name aloud to himself, then gave a sniggering laugh.

"I got up from the table to get oil for the lamp. With my back turned I was fumbling among packages on a shelf when suddenly he shouted:

"*'Smith!'*

"I fairly jumped at the sound of my name—it was like a pistol shot—and of course I whirled about in surprise. The fellow in the doorway seemed delighted with the shock he had given me. He laughed harshly, triumphantly, and advanced into the room. "'You know me?' I asked in bewilderment. 'Beard and all,' he retorted. I turned again to the shelf, but he stopped me sharply. 'What are you after?'—'Oil for the lamp,' I explained.—'No, you don't. Sit down!' he commanded, and he actually levelled a revolver at me."

Mr. Smith paused for breath and regarded me a little anxiously, as if fearing to find me incredulous. But my complete attention seemed to reassure him. He resumed:

"Well, naturally, I sat down. Very limply, as if my legs had suddenly given way. I admit I was scared. The fellow might be crazy. And that revolver glinting in his hands terrified me. I had never looked into the muzzle of any firearm from exactly that position. Meanwhile the lamp was flickering its last and the darkness deepening around us. It was

creeping out past the Cap Indienne light to the open sea, where the day still lingered.

"I didn't relish sitting in the dark with a madman. The thought of that lamp going out seemed almost as terrible as the muzzle of his revolver suddenly spouting flame. I remonstrated: the lamp must be refilled. 'None of your slippery tricks!' he retorted curtly. He sat down at the other side of the table, with his right hand resting alert upon the edge. It held the revolver, which still covered me.

"The lamp guttered its last, with that hostile, mysterious presence growing even more menacing as it merged with the dark. And suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the whole room was illumined. It was the first flare of the Cap Indienne light, breaking out its powerful ray and sweeping the empty sea for I don't know how many miles. Donaldson's cabin, I should have told you, had a broad window from which you could look down upon a considerable stretch of the coast. The blunt promontory known as Cap Indienne directly fronted it. In that vast solitude the lighthouse was like a gaunt, lonely obelisk, with a single fiery eye that revolved endlessly.

"For an instant the room was like day, and then we were plunged again into complete darkness. For twelve long seconds. During which the ray transcribed its vast circumference, and then, with startling suddenness, everything in the cabin once more leaped out into blinding reality. I can shut my eyes now and still see it all: the heavy round table at which we sat, the ancient chairs, the littered shelves on the opposite wall where were ranged some birds Donaldson had stuffed, looking down at us with beadlike, unblinking eyes. Everything became visible for an instant and then vanished. Twelve seconds of utter blackness. Each time it seemed like an eternity before the flash came again."

Mr. Smith broke off and sighed over the recollection. He even drew out a handkerchief and passed it over his face.

"I never could tell you all the weird, insane talk that followed in that intermittent darkness. It seems now like nothing but a nightmare, quite incredible. I sat there in a cold chill, helpless to move, if I could have moved, while the light came and went, and that revolver continued to point at me. And with the growing certainty that he intended presently to empty its contents into my body. He had waited



years for this chance, I gathered. He had been confined all that time in prison, for which apparently I was to blame, and there were others—a gang of ruffians, it seemed—who equally thirsted for my extinction. At first I thought that the fellow was drunk or out of his head. My own head was in too much of a whirl to get it all clearly. But after a while I concluded that there was really something in it. I must have a sort of double; there was another Smith, and down there in Santa Clara—of all places!—I had been mistaken for him.

“But my visitor was in no hurry. Like a cat with a mouse in its clutches, he proposed to savour leisurely the delight of making an end of me. He had looked forward too long to this moment—to have it all over with one quick bang of that pistol. He wanted to gloat in his horrible way over what was so obviously coming to me. And he had, I suppose, what you might call a sense of the dramatic. For when he caught sight of a bottle of Scotch whisky on the shelf beneath the stuffed birds he brought it to the table with a couple of glasses. ‘We’ll have a drink,’ he announced in the darkness. ‘It will be like old times.’ And he laughed hideously.

“Just then the flash came again, and I got a vivid sight of him, his mouth wide open, like a black hole in his shrunken, pasty-white face. The prison pallor was still on him. What he looked like, I really don’t know. In those flashing glimpses of him, when everything suddenly leaped out of the dark, his face seemed like a hideous mask, contorted and triumphant. ‘After you,’ he said grimly, and pushed the bottle across the table. I must have come out of my paralyzed state enough to pour myself a drink. When the room blazed with light I saw him with uplifted glass. ‘Here’s to your dead carcass, and may you roast in hell!’ he announced. Mechanically I raised my glass and tasted it. I suppose my dislike for Scotch whisky dates from that moment.”

Mr. Smith took up his glass, sipped it, and smiled dismally. “It brings back everything.”

“Don’t drink it,” I interposed. “Let me get you something else.” But he shook his head. He was silent for some moments, thoughtfully turning the glass in his fingers and watching the ice dissolving in it. Suddenly he looked up.

“What would you have done in a fix like that?” And without waiting for a reply, he went on: “It seems simple enough

now. I should have told the fellow at once that he had got hold of the wrong Smith. Nothing easier. But at the time it wasn't. For one thing, my tongue seemed glued to the roof of my mouth. It was like a jelly. Frantic thoughts whirling in my brain until it almost hummed. If only Donaldson would come back. If only Wilcox would stroll over from the lighthouse. Which, of course, he was not permitted to do at night. I even prayed for some miracle to intervene and save me. And in the meantime I sat in that hot, dreadful darkness, braced against that recurrent, measured moment when, like a lash across the eyes, would come that swift, splintering light. And the horror of it all would once more stand revealed like noonday—that brutal, villainous face, whisky glass in one hand, revolver in the other.

“The bottle went again across the table. I managed to find my voice at last. I didn't like the stuff, I protested; I didn't want another drink. Only to be overwhelmed with curses. His language in moments of special irritation like this was really quite dreadful. He swore I'd drink with him or he would blow the—I believe he said the everlasting daylight—out of me, then and there. When the flash came again I saw that he had lifted the revolver. He informed me that I had always been a timorous little white-livered skunk. Felt myself too good to associate with common people. If he had only realized it ten years ago, fool that he had been to fall for me. However, the reckoning was at hand, and to-night all old scores would be settled.

“And so I drank, choked the raw stuff down somehow. Each time it seemed more nauseous than the last. He gulped his down with positive relish, and grew boisterous as it mounted to his head. ‘We'll drink to all the old gang!’ he suddenly exclaimed. ‘Fill your glass!’

“The light came and went as I poured again. The stuffed birds, stiff and motionless on the shelf, made a grotesque audience, looking down upon us with unseeing, buttonlike eyes. ‘Here's to Jake Sprague!’ he toasted. ‘Lift your dirty glass!’ He waited for the flash to come again to see if I had obeyed. And then, in the darkness, his voice suddenly dropped to a cold, menacing tone. ‘Do you know what happened to Jake, you stuck-up, white-livered skunk? He did three years before they had to put him in the hospital ward. His lungs

were gone. They let me see him once before he died. Last thing he says to me, he says, "Spike, I'm a goner. Listen, Spike, when you get out of here you've got to get Smith if you swing for it. And when you plunk the little bastard plunk him once for me!" . . . Here's to good old Jake!"

Mr. Smith paused to mop his forehead, upon which beads of perspiration had gathered. This memory of his youth was still very real to him. "Can you imagine me in a predicament like that? Can you imagine?"

Frankly, I couldn't. It seemed too unutterably absurd. With that beard which gave him an almost academic air, his timid, inquiring eyes, and his stiffish, formal speech. He seemed a harmless creature in a world of hardier spirits.

"Do I look like a crook? Do I?" he appealed to me again.

"You certainly don't," I assured him.

"All this happened nearly twenty years ago. Perhaps I looked different then," he went on in his childlike simplicity. "I may even have resembled that other Smith this fellow was after. I've often wondered just what points we may have had in common." He revolved this enigma in his mind for a few moments.

"Of course your guilty start when he called you 'Smith' seemed to give you away," I pointed out.

"Perhaps you are right," he said absently. "But it wasn't a guilty start; I simply jumped at the unexpected shout of my name." He pondered this for a while. "Yes, it was misleading and most unfortunate." He proceeded with his story.

"After the toast to the deceased Jake Sprague, it was the turn of a certain Dickey White. The bottle again went across the table, and I had to listen to another maudlin eulogy, with scorching comment upon myself. If I had any last glimmering of doubt as to my visitor's cold-blooded intentions, it vanished completely. I wouldn't have believed that any man on earth could focus upon himself such collective, fiendish hate as this mysterious Smith I had been taken for. It almost turned me sick. And yet here's a curious thing. Like a man put under sentence of death, once the first shock and realization of it were over, I began to get used to it. As those dreadful toasts to my former pals proceeded, my thoughts steadied.

"I started at last to argue with him. I wasn't the man he

was after. But I had come to my senses too late, for his were gone—thanks to all those drinks of whisky. He was past the stage where I could reason with him. He only grew violent and began again to curse. ‘What in the world would I be doing here?’ I demanded. ‘Hiding, of course!’ he retorted. ‘But I’m a bird collector for the government.’ That sounded so silly to him that he only laughed. I persisted, until he raised his gun. ‘Shut up!’ he commanded, ‘or I’ll bump you off now.’ And I shut up. My life hung by a thread, but it was folly to cut that thread.

“When he passed the bottle again I didn’t dare refuse. I poured myself another scant helping. My mind was struggling desperately for a way out of that awful fix. I’m not what you’d call a man of action, exactly. And mentally I was all tangled up. This was too much like something one reads about in a book. Something that doesn’t happen—least of all to one’s self. And yet here it was actually happening to me. The reality and yet unreality of it somehow wouldn’t reconcile themselves in my mind.

“But the repeated sight of the muzzle of that revolver every time there came that blinding flare of light was enough to drive me to any desperate step. I even considered just bolting in the dark, but the round table was of enormous size, and it stood between me and the door. For all his maudlin talk, his right hand remained like a thing apart from himself, alert and ready. Each time the white flash swept the room I saw the revolver covering me. He was evidently an old hand at tricks of that sort. A sudden dash on my part would only be inviting destruction. If I could have snatched the ugly thing out of his grasp—but the mere breadth of the table barred so desperate a chance. Besides, I knew that in a hand-to-hand struggle I should be no match for him.

“If only I could lay hands on a weapon of some sort. My fingers fairly itched. Again came that blinding moment of unnatural daylight, and I looked desperately about. My collector’s gun hung upon the opposite wall. There was nothing within reach, nothing I could snatch up that might offer even a chance for unequal battle.

“He passed the bottle again with a harsh command to ‘Drink up!’ My fingers closed mechanically upon it, lifted it. And suddenly a thrill went over me. *The bottle!* As I shakily



poured my drink in the dark I felt its smooth flanks, appraised its weight. The flash came just then, and I saw its thick, heavy bottom. 'Come across with that bottle!' he commanded impatiently.

"But I knew it would come back to me again, and now I had a desperate hope, a half-formed plan. My heart began to crowd up into my throat and beat thickly as I mentally rehearsed the execution of that foolhardy design. The bottle! It was my only recourse, my only chance, against his gun.

"It sounds absurd now, doesn't it? One chance—would you say—in a hundred? For I couldn't reach across to brain him with it; the table was too wide. I would have to hurl it at his head—and in the dark—trusting that it would find its mark.

"But when it came to that ticklish moment of lifting it and aiming it at his head for that desperate fling on which everything hung I didn't want liquor spilling out of it. We would have to drink it dry. So I poured myself a stiffer drink. When the room blazed again he saw what I had done and laughed. He even applauded my increasing thirst.

"I gagged over the fiery stuff, but I got it down. It never occurred to me that it might make me intoxicated. And I give you my word, it didn't have the slightest effect. Once I had managed to swallow it, it might have been so much water. Drink after drink—ugh! But I contrived to reverse the order of pouring. 'After you!' I now said, and so after each replenishment of our glasses the bottle remained on my side of the table.

"At length it was empty. The last of the whisky was in our glasses. I could feel my heart thumping like a trip hammer, only no trip hammer ever went at such a pace. It was now literally do or die. He tossed off what remained of his drink and threw the glass to the floor. 'Time's up!' he announced thickly. The returning flare lit up his determined, evil face. He had raised the revolver and was leaning slightly forward. He meant business. 'I'll give you ten more flashes of that light. When the tenth comes, I shoot. . . . That's one!'

"The darkness was upon us again. The light was gone, in its vast circular sweep over the empty sea. Ten flashes—one hundred and twenty seconds, I calculated. I had two minutes to live. You may be surprised that I could do a simple bit of

multiplication and division at a moment like that. But I did it, and rather deliberately, too. For a sort of cold apathy had come over me. Yes, I deliberated. For while only two minutes stood between me and death, nevertheless I was sure of those two minutes. Within that narrow margin of time I had, so to speak, all the time in the world. To fling that bottle at his head was the work of an instant.

"So I deliberated. Should I hurl it at once or wait? While I was pondering the question, the room blazed again. 'That's two!' he said. He had straightened up now, prepared for the business in hand. His fingers had tightened upon the revolver.

"I rehearsed in my mind what I was about to do. I tried to visualize the bottle clutched in my hand. I tried to imagine its heft when lifted above and behind my head—just how it would feel—and then the swift fling with all my strength. I was strangely composed, although my heart was racing with tremendous heat. I could feel the pounding even in my ears. For example, I reflected that there was a nicety about that throw, quite as important as correctness of aim. The bottle must not turn too fast in midair. The success of my desperate manoeuvre might depend upon the bottle striking his skull with its heavy end. The most I could hope for was to knock him cold, as they say, while I made a dash from the cabin toward Cap Indienne.

"'Three!' he counted, as the room suddenly leaped out into reality and vanished again. 'Shall I risk it now?' I asked myself, and hesitated. Meanwhile, with every instant, the ray was sweeping out around its vast circular track. No, I wasn't yet set. I wanted the full twelve-second interval of darkness, not a fraction of it. And how could I be sure of my aim in the dark? Under that persistent flashing one's eyes didn't grow accustomed to it. Each recurrent flare only intensified the utter blackness that swept back into the room.

"So I waited. My hand crept out and felt the bottle, drew it slightly nearer. And then I dropped back to my former position before the coming of the next flash. 'Four!' went the count. Again I reached out in the dark and grasped the bottle by the neck, lifted it cautiously, adjudged its weight. More seconds went by. 'Five!'

"Half my time was gone. Should I wait, I debated, until the count reached eight, or even nine? No, that would be

too much like leaving things to the last moment—a practice I've always disapproved of. But I decided to let the count of six pass while I tried the experiment of shutting my eyes against the glare that repeatedly blinded them.

"Six!" I heard him announce. I opened my eyes after the flash had gone. Now I could dimly make him out in the darkness. The time was shortening, but I decided to give my eyes still one more respite. I waited, and shut them again during the count of seven!

"And now for it. I reached out for the bottle, gripped it firmly but not too tightly, and raised it back behind my head. I was really quite deliberate about all this. I had twelve seconds for the work of an instant. I balanced the bottle in preparation for the shot, swung it tentatively back and forth past my ear, much like a golfer making preliminary motions over his ball. I could dimly discern his head like a round blotch in the darkness. I took aim, a deep breath, and let fly.

"There was an awful crash, a great splintering of glass, and my visitor went bodily backward, chair and all, to the floor. And at the same instant came a flash and terrific report, for his revolver had gone off in his spasmodic clutch as he tumbled over. It fell from his hand, and in my dash for the door my foot struck it. I groped about and luckily found it. And once I felt the warm, sweaty butt in my grasp, my panic subsided. I turned and waited for the next flare of light. It came, revealing him limp and unconscious—a most unpleasant sight. I could see, at one appalling glance, there was nothing to run away from now. The bottle had worked incredible havoc. His skull was laid open above the left eye and an ominous trickle of blood was spreading out over the floor. When I dashed off at top speed toward the lighthouse it was not for refuge but to seek help."

Mr. Smith sighed heavily and leaned back in his chair as if exhausted. He mopped his face with his handkerchief while his timid blue eyes regarded me with anxious concern. "You understand, don't you? It was not at all what I had planned. But how could I have known? I had no idea how dangerous it might be to throw a bottle at a person's head.

"By way of sequel I stood trial for manslaughter in the Barbados court," he added, with lowered eyes and a little shame-faced. "But that experience was not as bad as it may

sound. The British commissioner at Santa Clara who had entertained me was most sympathetic. I had no trouble at all in convincing him that I had not been the aggressor. He said he was sure I wouldn't kill a man in cold blood. Thanks to him, the whole affair in the end was little more than a court formality, for in the meantime it had been ascertained that the fellow was actually an ex-convict from the States. How he got me mixed up with the other Smith and then tracked me all the way to Santa Clara I never could figure out. Donaldson, who turned up the day after the unhappy affair, couldn't make head or tail of it."

Mr. Smith was silent for a few moments, his forehead wrinkled with a perplexed frown. "You'd have to think up some explanation of that—wouldn't you?—if you made all this into a story."

I nodded assent.

"And that other Smith—you'd have to get him into the story somewhere?"

"We might pretend that Donaldson was the other Smith," I suggested.

He puzzled over this for a long moment, and suddenly his face lighted.

"Now that's an idea!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. He pondered further over my proposed emendation of his tale, shaking his head with a sort of envy mingled with admiration as its possibilities grew clear to him. "Do you know, I would never have thought of that. Well, after all, you writers . . ." His voice trailed off absently. Presently he sighed, in a kind of resignation, and pushed aside his half-emptied glass:

"I guess my line is just birds."